

Opinion: Alaskans still waiting for action on B.C. mine pollution



HEATHER HARDCASTLE

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Tulsequah Chief mine site, circa 2010. *RIVERS WITHOUT BORDERS / PNG*

When B.C. Minister of Energy and Mines Bill Bennett visited Juneau, Alaska, almost two years ago, to discuss transboundary mining, he gave me

his personal cell number and said, “Now, Heather, you contact me if you ever feel like things aren’t working out.”

Well, things are definitely not working out. In the time since Bennett was in Juneau, he hasn’t allayed Alaskans’ concerns about Canadian, large-scale mining development near the headwaters of great “transboundary” salmon rivers that flow from northwest B.C. into southeast Alaska. To the contrary, our fear and frustration have only grown since he last visited the iconic region of the Taku, Stikine and Unuk rivers watersheds shared by Canada and the U.S.

When Bennett was here, he said he could understand why we Alaskans don’t trust B.C. to protect our interests as we sit downstream of at least 10 Canadian abandoned, proposed and operating open-pit and underground copper-gold mines. He said he was moved by the beauty and vastness of this transboundary region — a region that has been home to indigenous people on both sides of the border for thousands of years and is one of the planet’s largest remaining producers of wild salmon.

But Bennett hasn’t yet met any of his promises to us. Bennett is about to retire from political office in a matter of days. At this point, he may be remembered in Canada only as the energy and mines minister under whose watch Canada’s largest mining disaster occurred at Mount Polley. And in Alaska, he’s in danger of being remembered as the minister who failed to meet key commitments he made to his neighbours, while, as our guest, catching and dining on a Taku River wild coho salmon at the Alaska governor’s mansion.

B.C.’s Tulsequah Chief mine (TCM) continues to leach acid-mine drainage into the Taku River watershed, southeast Alaska’s largest salmon producer, as it has since Cominco (now Teck) walked away from it 60 years ago. Alaska Lt.-Gov. Byron Mallott flew with Bennett via helicopter over the TCM to see the pollution firsthand. At the time, Bennett said he was surprised to see this mine is, quite literally, in Juneau’s backyard. However, Bennett has recently said to the B.C. legislature that this pollution isn’t causing an emergency, so business can continue as usual.

B.C. will, yet again, look for a new company to presumably clean-up this mine. But, Bennett forgets that the last two owners went bankrupt trying to

reopen the mine. Moreover, Bennett hasn't mentioned holding Teck, the original owner, liable for this pollution that violates the Canadian Fisheries Act, B.C. mine permits and an agreement with the Taku River Tlingit First Nation.

Bennett should begin by honouring his promises to clean-up the Tulsequah Chief mine. It must not stop there. Those of us downstream were aghast after the B.C. government permitted Imperial Metals' much-larger Red Chris mine (RCM) to open in the Stikine watershed less than six months after their tailings breach at Mount Polley, which sent 6.6 billion gallons of toxic waste into the Fraser River. B.C. tailings experts estimate that these types of mine-tailings dams will fail at a rate of two every 10 years; it's not a question of if, but when.

Alaska takes on virtually all of the risks of future pollution from the RCM, the proposed Kerr-Sulphurets Mitchell mine (KSM) in the Unuk River watershed (which would be the largest, open-pit mine in North America) and others in the transboundary region. Yet Alaskans have no assurance pollution will be cleaned-up and losses we suffer will be compensated; a concern Bennett admitted required federal governance.

B.C. and Alaska can't fully address this problem with a non-binding, unfunded Memorandum of Understanding alone. I ask that Bennett publicly acknowledge that this international problem is bigger than he is; that it also requires (by law) international governance, as two nations, sovereign tribes and First Nations, and the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 are involved.

I had hoped when Bennett and I talked about wild places and wild fish that he would be inspired to use his power to ensure the productive, intact watersheds of northwest B.C. and southeast Alaska will not be irreparably harmed by B.C. mines. It's still not too late to show Alaskans that my hope was not misguided, and his promises were more than empty rhetoric.

Heather Hardcastle is co-owner of Taku River Reds and a director of Salmon Beyond Borders.

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Laurie Mastrella · Haines, Alaska

After getting rattled by two 6.0+ earthquakes in Haines AK the other day, I wonder: can those tailings dams stand up to seismic activity? The consequences of another failure like Mt. Polley are unthinkable to those of us in Southeast Alaska who rely on salmon to support our families.

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